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ABSTRACT

This study explores the notion of "fear of success" as a function of cultural expectations rather than as an intrapsychic motive held by women. A total of 476 male and female students (including 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 12th graders) were tested on semantic differential scales to gauge their reactions to the success or failure of a woman or a man. It was expected that the woman would not be rated negatively for failure. It was also expected that younger children would be more dogmatic than older children in applying cultural stereotypes to these situations. The children respond on semantic differential scales to the cue of Anne (John) succeeding (failing) in medical school. The children rated a successful person as much happier than one who failed, but the sex of the person succeeding or failing was entirely irrelevant. However, the results were as predicted for niceness: a woman was somewhat less nice than a man when they both succeeded, but a man was much less nice when they both failed. There were no interactions with age of sex of the respondents. The results were interpreted to suggest that sex-role expectations are relevant to some attributes of individuals but not to others, and that these expectations are well-established as early as third grade. (Author/BRT)

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A Developmental Exploration of the Fear of Success Phenomenon As Cultural Stereotype

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ABSTRACT

To pursue the notion of "fear of Success" as a function of cultural expectations rather than as an intrapsychic motive held by women, this phenomenon was placed in juxtaposition with reactions to women and men failing. It was expected that women would not be rated negatively for failure. It was also expected that younger children (of 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 12th graders) would be more dogmatic than older children in applying cultural stereotypes to these situations. The children responded on semantic differential scales to the cue of Anne (John) succeeding (failing) in medical school. The children rated a successful person much happier than one who failed, but the sex of the person succeeding or failing was entirely irrelevant. However, the results were as predicted for niceness: a woman was somewhat less nice than a man when they both succeeded, but a man was much less nice when they failed. In addition, there were no interactions with the age or sex of the respondents. Thus, sex-role expectations are relevant to some attributes of individuals but not others, and these expectations are well-established and easily applied as early as third grade.

Horner's suggestion (1968, 1970) that the divergence of male and female subjects on achievement motivation (Atkinson & Feather, 1966; French & Lesser, 1964; Veroff, Wilcox, & Atkinson, 1953) may reflect the presence of a female motive to avoid success has received widespread and simplistic publicity. While this publicity has had the salutary effect of triggering many further investigations (as reviewed by Tresemer, 1973), Horner's research has often been reported as unequivocally establishing the "fear of success" as a motive for all women. For example, Psychology Today published an abbreviated review by Tresemer (1974) under the title "Popular, but Unproven," and then began describing it prominently in subscription campaigns as containing the facts about why women fail!

Briefly, Horner's college students wrote a short story in response to the cue of success in first-term medical school finals. To facilitate projection of the participant's own feelings and motives, females responded to Anne and males to John. When stories were scored for themes of social rejection, fears and negative feelings about success, and bizarre or hostile responses, 66% of the women but only 9% of the men had responded negatively, thus suggesting a fear of success on the part of women. Subsequent studies have used a wide range of populations, scoring methods, and cue situations (Tresemer, 1973), but perhaps the most interesting are those that question the basic assumption that the "fear of success" phenomenon reflects the respondent's own projected motives and emotions.

Monahan, Kuhn, and Shaver (1974) point out that Horner's design permits an entirely different interpretation of her findings: negative responses to Anne's success could simply reflect cultural stereotypes about women succeeding in traditionally male settings. Women's "fear of success" should produce negative

imagery to a success cue whether the cue is male or female, and men will be unlikely to produce negative imagery in either case. Stereotypes, on the other hand, should result in negative responses to Anne by both men and women, with relatively few negative images in response to John's success. Their findings with 10 to 16-year-olds support the cultural stereotype explanation: it would seem that women do not fear success so much as society fears successful women!

As a function of cultural stereotypes, the "fear of success" phenomenon becomes just one outcropping of societal expectations about women and men, and should be examined in the context of other outcroppings. For example, while a successful woman evokes negative imagery, a woman who fails in a predominately male position does not counter societal expectations. Placing success and failure in a 2X2 design with Anne and John, one would thus predict an interaction: Anne should receive more negative imagery than John when they succeed, but less when they both fail. (This test is preferable to separate tests for success and failure in that it removes any overall contribution of sex of cue).

In addition, a cultural explanation of the "fear of success" phenomenon suggests that the expectations behind this reaction to successful women should be acquired along with other aspects of sex-role socialization. Furthermore, the abstraction and inference required for such judgments suggest that developmental study of "fear of success" and related phenomena should provide insights into the application of and generalization from such basic acquisitions as sex-role identity and permanence. As a beginning, we expected that concrete operational-aged children would be most rigid and stereotyped in their responses, and thus show the predicted interaction most strongly. Adolescents should be more willing to consider alternatives to societal stereotypes. Alternatively, however, the inferences required to produce a stereotyped response to these cues may be too difficult for young children or they may not have had enough exposure to the details of sex-role stereotypes -- in these cases the interaction would increase in strength with age.

METHOD

Participants

The respondents in this study were 476 students from the 3rd, 6th, 9th, and 12th grades, approximately equally divided between boys and girls. The school district serves one small town and a surrounding rural area. District averages suggest that the children were poorer than the national average (Duncan score 33), but average in intelligence (IQ 100, Iowa Tests, Memon-Nelson).

Procedures

Third and sixth graders responded to the questionnaire in their classrooms, ninth and twelfth graders in study halls or assemblies. A team of a male and a female experimenter introduced the questionnaire as a study of what students of different ages think of people studying for different jobs. The stacks of questionnaires were randomly ordered so that each student read one of four brief stories: "Anne (John) has just started medical school and is studying to become a doctor. The first exams are just over, and Anne (John) was best (worst) in her (his) whole class." Students then gave us their impression of Anne or John using the semantic differential scales described below. In third grade classrooms, one of the experimenters read the word pairs out loud as the students responded.

Measures

Tresemer (1973) identified a number of serious problems in measuring fear of success imagery. Researchers have used a wide variety of different and subjective coding schemes, some of which are misleading or over-inclusive. To these problems of measurement we would add two more. First, while careful studies can attain high reliability among coders, it seems preferable to avoid the problem of coder subjectivity entirely with self-scoring measures. More importantly, reconceptualization of the "fear of success" phenomenon as an expression of cultural stereotypes suggests that previous measurements may be inappropriate. Prior studies

have attempted to divide subjects into two nominally different classes: those with "fear of success" and those without it. While this approach may be reasonable for identifying the existence of a motive, it is probably not the best way to measure cultural expectations and stereotypes, which may be composed of one or more probably continuous dimensions. The interval-scaled semantic differential technique should provide more precise and informative measurement than techniques that place a single dividing point. Thus, relationships among experimental conditions should be clearer using the semantic differential.

After reading about Anne or John, then, students responded to 15 semantic differential pairs (abstracted from descriptions of fear of success imagery), with instructions to skip any pairs of words that were unknown. Four of the 15 scales were skipped by 15 or more of our 476 respondents (usually third graders), so a factor analysis was performed on the 11 remaining questions. Two clear factors emerged, with nine of the eleven scales loading strongly on one factor but not the other as follows:

Factor 1 (Happiness): Happy, calm, strong, wise, fearless, popular

Factor 2 (Niceness): Unselfish, honest, nice

The factor scores on these two dimensions were used as the dependent variables in the analyses reported below.

RESULTS

Several manipulation checks were performed before the main hypotheses were examined. First, respondents differentiated strongly between success and failure, rating success much more positively on both dimensions (Happiness: $F(1,460)=316$, $p<.001$; Niceness: $F(1,460)=11.25$, $p<.001$). There were no overall differences in ratings of Anne or John, calling this manipulation into question, but an interaction with sex of respondent showed that this manipulation was attended to. Both boys and girls rated the opposite sex as less happy than their own ($F(1,460)=6.45$, $p<.025$). No such interaction appeared for the second factor score, Niceness.

The overall tests of our main hypothesis that lower ratings of Anne when she succeeds would be matched by lower ratings of John for failure are shown in Table 1. For the factor score we labeled Happiness, there was no interaction of the sex and success of the cue story. The results for niceness, however, supported our predictions. Anne was not quite as nice as John when they succeeded, while he was much less nice when they had both failed in medical school ($F(1,460)=4.08$, $p<.05$). One could conclude from this that while Happiness is tied quite closely to one's success or failure rather than to one's sex, one's Niceness differs according to sex. Success or failure seems to be irrelevant to a woman's Niceness, so that even in failure a woman remains relatively nice.

Table 2 presents the separate means at each grade level used to test our developmental prediction that the strength of the overall interaction would decrease with age. As the means suggest, neither the predicted linear trend (tested by planned comparisons among means) nor a post-hoc test of whether the apparently deviant grade was significantly different from the others (Scheffé's method for post-hoc comparisons, Hays, 1963) revealed any developmental trend. It would thus seem that the knowledge of the relevant sex-role stereotypes is well-established and easily applied in this situation by third grade, and once society's norms are learned, they are maintained throughout the age range we studied.

While this seems to be a very reasonable explanation, the apparent lack of age trends could be masking different developmental trends for female and male respondents. To check for this possibility, the grade by result by sex of cue means as shown in Table 2 were calculated separately for females and males. Because we had no specific grade by sex predictions, the planned comparison for a linear trend and post-hoc comparisons for other trends were repeated for each sex. However, there were no significant developmental differences for either sex. With this control established, we can have somewhat greater confidence in the above explanation.

One further set of analyses was performed as a partial check on the argument put forth for the choice of a semantic differential measure. We argued that an interval measure better approximated the presumably continuous dimensions of expectations and stereotypes, and that this change from a yes-no type of measurement should only result in greater precision of measurement. It is conceivable, however, that the relationship of experimental conditions or other behaviors to this variable is other than linear or involves multiple discreet ranges instead of just two.

To check for this possibility, we transformed our interval measures into dichotomous ones to separate those respondents who rated Anne or John extremely negatively (the analogue to self-generated negative imagery) from those who did not. If a child responded with a negative code (1,2, or 3 on a 1 - 7 scale) on any of the three Niceness items, she/he was coded as negative for Niceness. The same procedure was used to dichotomize responses to the Happiness items. Replication of analysis of variance results (including some peripheral analyses not reported above) was obtained consistently, although the chi-square statistics less often reached significance. To narrow the focus to those individuals who were extremely negative in one or more of their ratings, the above procedure was repeated using only the two most negative scale positions with no change in results. Analyses using only the most negative scale position were not possible, since too few of the students ever used this response.

These tests are not entirely conclusive. They rest on the analogy between a coder's judgment that negative imagery is present and a respondent's use of the negative extremes of semantic differential scales. To the extent that such an analogy is valid, however, we can say that we have been measuring the same phenomenon as have previous studies and that our results should serve to further illuminate that phenomenon.

DISCUSSION

These findings suggest that the "fear of success" phenomenon can be usefully interpreted as a result of cultural expectations. For one of the two factor dimensions, Niceness (unselfish, honest, nice), lowered expectations of successful women were balanced by lessened denigration for failure at a male-dominated role. That reactions to the sexes in these two situations are related in a way predicted by societal conventions begins to place the "fear of success" phenomenon as a cultural expectation in a context of other expectations. Furthermore, the uniformity of response of female and male respondents corroborates Monahan, Kuhn, and Shaver's (1974) contention that the phenomenon is better understood as a function of cultural than of intrapsychic factors and further helps to place it with other studies of sex-role stereotyping where no sex differences have been found (Beuf, 1974; Freuh & McGhee, 1974; Maccoby & Jacklin, 1974).

Thus, we have a beginning from this and other studies at mapping the way in which cultural expectations about the sexes fit together. As recent attempts to modify stereotypes have shown (Gunnentag, 1975; Pingree, 1975), we still need to know a great deal more about the acquisition and application of complex sex-role expectations. While the lack of developmental trends from third to twelfth grade leaves us with somewhat less information than we might have wished, important pieces of the puzzle have been added. Knowing that sex-role expectations can be and are applied to a relatively abstract situation with adult-like results as early as third grade, and that such application remains fairly constant through high school provides a benchmark against which further work can be compared.

Two directions for such future work seem particularly important. First, more attention should be focused on ages four to eight, since it seems that it is during this period that the initial acquisition of gender identity and learning of salient sex attributes begins to be applied to a variety of situations. Second, because the abstraction, inferential difficulty, and ambiguity of the

situation in which children are to apply their knowledge seem to be potentially important intervening variables, these factors should be operationalized and methodically, rather than intuitively, varied.

Finally, this study reveals that sex-role stereotypes are relevant to some aspects of children's perceptions of women and men but not to others. Factor analysis of semantic differential responses indicated that children's responses to Anne and John succeeding and failing varied along two independent dimensions. More importantly, children saw the dimension we labeled Happiness (happy, calm, strong, wise, fearless, and popular) as inextricably bound to success or failure, with the sex of the person succeeding or failing irrelevant. In contrast, while a woman is slightly less Nice (unselfish, honest, and nice) than a man when they succeed, she is much nicer when they fail. In other words, sex is irrelevant to many attributes of individuals, but not the moral attributes clustered under Niceness, which is something a woman retains regardless of her success or failure.

While this distinction strikes us as provocative in itself, there may also be important further ramifications. Even if the two dimensions found here are somehow peculiar to the stimuli used, finding them differently related to sex and performance suggests a whole program of further research aimed at enhancing or attentuating effects or providing remedial action tailored to the specific attributes involved.

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Table 1

Mean Factor Scores with All Grades Combined

Happiness

	Anne	John
Success	.66	.68
Failure	-.71	-.59

Niceness

	Anne	John
Success	.12	.19
Failure	.01	-.30

Table 2

Mean Factor Scores Broken Down by Grade

HAPPINESS

	Grade 3		Grade 6		Grade 9		Grade 12	
	Anne	John	Anne	John	Anne	John	Anne	John
Success	.87	.68	.55	.67	.61	.61	.60	.75
Failure	-.05	.17	-1.04	-.97	-.82	-.66	-.87	-.75
Predicted Contrast Results:	-.41*		.05		-.16		.03	

NICENESS

	Grade 3		Grade 6		Grade 9		Grade 12	
	Anne	John	Anne	John	Anne	John	Anne	John
Success	.23	.77	.50	.19	-.10	.09	-.19	-.27
Failure	.20	.18	-.23	-.24	.02	-.63	.08	-.45
Predicted Contrast Results:	.56		-.30		.84		.45	

*These numbers are included to help make a 16-entry table more meaningful by summing up how much children at a given grade did or did not follow the predicted interaction. Thus, the -.41 for third grade Happiness equals (+.68 - .87 + (-.05) - .17), suggesting that these children were, if anything, in the reverse of the predicted pattern.

Footnotes

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